The Construction of "Cultural Imagery" in Chinese Films

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Abstract. In the discourse surrounding "Self-Orientalization" and "Orientalism," the critical determinant is the effective dissemination of what is termed "Chinese cultural imagery." The specific methodology for accurately constructing "Chinese cultural imagery" involves the integration of both cultural symbols and philosophical insights to attain a state of equilibrium or "balance." The oeuvre of director Ang Lee serves as a paradigm of productive cultural dialogue, successfully conveying Chinese cultural imagery to global audiences, and positively impacting global cultural exchange and garnering affirming responses, understanding, and public sentiment.

Keywords: Orientalism; Chinese Cultural imagery; Chinese philosophy; Ang Lee; *"Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"*

1   Introduction

The 2022 film "*Everything Everywhere All at Once*" has provoked discourse within both Chinese and ethnic Chinese communities. Historically, throughout the last century, the pervasive ideology of "Orientalism" has led to a perception of China and East Asia as dominated, consumed, and weakened, particularly emphasizing a belittling perspective [1] (p 12). However, the author posits that this film embodies a phenomenon described as "Self-Orientalization." Analyzing the film's aesthetic design reveals a synthesis of Eastern and Western elements in spatial configuration, costume design, and character portrayal, representing what might be termed a "cultural combination." While the integration and display of Chinese cultural symbols such as martial arts, Taoist attire, and traditional Chinese theater costumes appear to advocate Chinese culture, they remain at a superficial level of "demonstration," with limited effectiveness in genuine "promotion." Furthermore, the film perpetuates certain stereotypes associated with Chinese and ethnic Chinese communities, including representations of Chinese laundries, working or middle-class Chinese individuals, traditional clothing of early-generation Chinese immigrants, non-English-speaking elders, and portrayals of Chinese men as weak characters.

relationship characterized by contrasts such as advanced and backward, freedom and autocracy, civilization and barbarism [2] (p 2417-2418). This notion implies Western superiority across various domains and the corresponding inferiority of the East. Furthermore, Zhong interprets "Self-Orientalization" as a form of self-critique and cultural evolution that involves forsaking Eastern traditions in favor of an amalgamation of Eastern and Western cultural and aesthetic principles [2] (p 2417-2418). The author contends that rather than gaining recognition or respect from Western hegemonic groups, "Self-Orientalization" risks a loss of Eastern distinctiveness, becoming an extension of Western culture.

Assessing "Self-Orientalization" is fraught with complexity. For example, diverging opinions surround the film "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" (2000). Some argue that it incorporates Western philosophy and values, with a performance that resonates with Western styles. Conversely, other scholars assert that the film heralds Chinese "Jianghu" culture, Confucianism, and Taoism, thus positively impacting global cultural exchange and garnering affirming responses, understanding, and public sentiment.

In the discourse surrounding "Self-Orientalization" and "Orientalism," Park posits that communicators and artists must embrace a novel cognitive and rhetorical paradigm [3] (p 196). The author contends that the critical determinant in this model hinges on the effective dissemination of what is termed "Chinese cultural imagery." Consequently, the principal inquiry driving this article centers on the definition and nature of "Chinese cultural imagery," and the methods by which filmmakers architect this concept through cinematic expression.

2   "Chinese Cultural Imagery": "Visible" Cultural Symbols and "Invisible" Philosophical Thoughts

Within the field of Chinese cultural studies, much emphasis has been placed on the interpretation and translation of cultural images as they manifest in poetry and literary works. However, there exists a notable research lacuna concerning the construction of cultural images within the cinematic medium. Despite this gap, films stand as one of the most prevalent and influential forms of cultural media and products, and as such, they present an area of study that merits scholarly exploration and attention.

The term "imagery" pertains to objective phenomena and visual representations that are shaped and organized through an individual's subjective cognition and comprehension. For illustration, when conveying the theme of "tranquility," director Ang Lee frequently employs expansive panoramas, depicting characters in serene settings such as beneath a large tree on a lawn, engaged in contemplative activities like enjoying the sun or reading. Through the use of landscape, soothing background music, and dialogues imbued with Chinese philosophical notions, Lee crafts an evocative imagery of "tranquility." The understanding of "imagery" varies among communicators and is often influenced by their unique cultural identities. Tang posits that 'cultural imagery encompasses amalgamations of historical legacy and national wisdom across diverse cultures, bearing relatively stable and distinct cultural meanings.' [4] (p 2) Meanwhile, Park defines "cultural imagery" as the depiction of national cultural symbols, cultivated

through a profound appreciation of a nation's cultural traditions, philosophical ideologies, and historical context [3] (p 19), thus forming a corresponding national cultural imagery. As an exemplification, Ang Lee's interpretation of "tranquility" is intrinsically linked to traditional Chinese philosophical principles.

The author posits that "Chinese cultural imagery" encompasses both tangible cultural symbols and more abstract, "invisible" philosophical notions. Regarding the interplay between symbols and ideas, Munro notes that both Greek philosophers and Confucian scholars employed a similar methodological approach in developing their theories and concepts: the interpretation of humanity through the utilization of metaphors [5] (p 337). This suggests that rhetorical devices such as "metaphors" and "tropes" serve as instrumental tools in visualizing and thus better comprehending philosophical thoughts and doctrines.

The specific methodology for accurately constructing "Chinese cultural imagery" involves the integration of both cultural symbols and philosophical insights to attain a state of equilibrium or "balance." In this context, the author's use of the term "accurate" resonates with concepts such as "reasonable," "harmonious," and "appropriate." For instance, the portrayal of Wallace's Buddhist ceremonial attire in the Hollywood film "Blade Runner 2049" (2017) is deemed inappropriate, as it fails to align with his social standing and belief system.

A state of equilibrium or "balance" is reflective of the Confucian principle of "Zhongyong" ("*中庸*" neutralization), which underscores the importance of harmonizing disparate elements into an "appropriate" state, and modulating "quantity" without altering the intrinsic nature of things [6] (p 199-200). In essence, this principle advocates for a balanced confluence of "cultural symbols" and "ideology" that achieves a state of "neutralization," where harmony and appropriateness prevail.

In the ensuing pages, the author will direct an examination specifically targeting Ang Lee's "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*" (2000), centering on the following inquiries: What philosophical concepts are articulated within the film? What cultural symbols are manifested in the cinematic work? What form of cultural imagery is constructed through these elements?

3   The Cultural Imagery of "Junzi" in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"

In Ang Lee's "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*", the character Wudang master Li Mubai (Chow Yun Fat), poised to depart the jianghu, entrusts Yu Xiulian (Michelle Yeoh) with delivering his sword, the Green Destiny, to master Beilei as a gift. The characters within this narrative have philosophy, creed, or inner motivation that directs their objectives and actions. Within the context of the traditional Chinese philosophical framework, grounded in Confucianism and Taoism, these guiding principles are collectively referred to as the "Dao" ("*道*" the way) [7] (p 4). In the Confucian tradition, the adherence to specific values necessitates reflection through social interactions. Consequently, individuals must rely on defined guidelines, standards, and rituals to instruct or

"cultivate" themselves in their engagements with others and the broader societal milieu. This notion constitutes the "Dao" of a "*Junzi*" ("君子" the sage)[7] (p 6-8).

3.1   The Narrative Design of Li Mubai

Li's adherence to the principle of "benevolence" is prominently demonstrated in his interaction with Yu JiaoLong (Jade Yu), the individual responsible for stealing his Green Destiny and instigating chaos. In his confrontation with Jade, Li articulates, "Your talent is commendable, but your grasp of Wudang's philosophy is flawed; you require proper guidance." Rather than resorting to mere force to reprimand her, Li opts to instruct her in the orthodox teachings of Wudang philosophy, aligned with the Confucian tenets of benevolence and righteousness. In a subsequent conversation with Yu Xiulian regarding Jade, Li elucidates his motivation for mentoring Jade, expressing that without proper guidance, Jade could devolve into malevolence, thereby exacerbating societal unrest.

In a dialogue between Li and Yu Xiulian concerning the Green Destiny, Li underscores that even the finest sword is but an instrument of killing, to which Yu Xiulian responds, "You are not one to kill without discernment. You are not a murderer; that is why you are worthy of this sword." Through this exchange, director Ang Lee subtly unveils Li's character as a Junzi, embodying Confucian benevolence. This portrayal sharply contrasts with the Taoist doctrine as presented by Zhuangzi, where there is a diminished emphasis on delineating "right and wrong."

3.2   The Representation of Cultural Symbols

In illustrating Li Mu Bai as a "Junzi" and a "master of Wudang," director Ang Lee employs traditional Chinese elements in props, scenery, and music, including the long coat, bamboo forest, and flute melodies. Li's long coat, modeled after a Taoist robe, symbolizes his Wudang mastery.

The bamboo forest, present exclusively in Li's scenes, holds cultural significance, symbolizing perseverance, resilience, and suppleness, reflecting the Confucian qualities of a Junzi.

The flute's gentle and melodious sound is reserved for Li's character, accompanying his appearances with traditional Chinese instruments like the erhu and violin. Its usage during key scenes, such as Li practicing Wudang martial arts or expressing his emotions to Yu Xiulian. Each flute sequence, whether solitary or in harmony with other instruments, , further accentuates the Junzi imagery, thereby reinforcing Li's character in alignment with Confucian principles.

4   The Cultural Imagery of "Xia" and "Da Dangjia" in "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon"

The concept of "*Xia*", or chivalry within Jianghu culture, draws substantially from Confucian principles of benevolence and righteousness [8] (p 19-21). Similar to the moral

virtues extolled by a Confucian "Junzi," the chivalrous "Xia" stresses values such as compassion, aiding others, penalizing wickedness, and advocating virtuous conduct. Nonetheless, in contrast to the self-discipline and decorum characteristic of a "Junzi," the ethos of "Xia" prioritizes values like trustworthiness and a more fervent commitment to righteousness.

4.1   The Narrative Design of Yu Xiulian

The characteristics of "Xia," or chivalry, are embodied in the actions of Yu Xiulian and manifest in several ways. Her assistance in delivering the Green Destiny to Master Beile on behalf of Li Mubai, her accountability in recovering the sword after its loss, and her cooperation with Li in pursuing the Fox responsible for the murder of Li's master, all stem from her sense of chivalry and righteousness. Yu Xiulian further articulates a guiding principle concerning the ethos of the Jianghu community or "Xia," stating: "In Jianghu, those who embody 'Xia' are governed by principles of friendship, trust, and righteousness. When entrusted with a responsibility, mission, or 'favor,' one must see it to fruition."

In addition to embodying the qualities of chivalry, Yu Xiulian holds the role of "*Da Dangjia*" ("大当家" or master of the house). This role entails caring for her staff, as evidenced by her decision to send them home early while she stayed behind in Beijing to investigate the disappearance of the Green Destiny. Upon her return home, she routinely inquires about their well-being and familial situation. These actions reflect Yu Xiulian's understanding of the obligations and responsibilities intrinsic to her position as a "*Da Dangjia*."

Yu Xiulian also assumed the role of an "elder"(another form of"*Da Dangjia*") in mentoring Jade. When Jade escaped from her arranged marriage, Yu Xiulian counseled her to return to Beijing, communicate with her parents, and consider the feelings of Luo Xiaohu. Yu Xiulian perceived these suggestions as manifestations of her "good intentions." However, it is not difficult to discern that this display of "good intention" essentially aligns with the Confucian tradition of "Paternalism." Paternalism refers to the assertion that an authority or individual possesses both the power and obligation to shield others from harm, albeit often at the expense of constraining their freedom of movement and intellectual autonomy [9] (p 3-4).

The discourse surrounding "Paternalism" has given rise to both criticism and support. Examining Ang Lee's films such as "Pushing Hands," "The Wedding Banquet," and "Eat Drink Man Woman," the author contends that the central issue with such unspoken rules or cultural practices lies in their incompatibility with modern civilization. For instance, modern civilization underscores the importance of individual free will, a concept that stands at odds with Confucian tradition, which often de-emphasizes "intellect" and "cognitive mind." Here, "intellect" and "cognitive mind" are defined as 'the understanding of external objects, encompassing the principles and verities of moral entities, characterized by logical reasoning and conceptual judgment rather than intuition' [9] (p. 118).

Despite these conflicts, it is also undeniable that certain aspects, ideas, and practices within these traditional concepts are commendable and worthy of promotion. This can

be observed in the film through Yu Xiulian's sense of responsibility and goodwill, which form the foundational motivations behind her efforts to guide Jade.

4.2   The Representation of Cultural Symbols

Director Ang Lee meticulously crafted certain cultural symbols associated with the character Yu Xiulian to underscore her identity as a chivalrous figure, or "Xia." First, her choice of weaponry is significant; though the film's opening finds Yu Xiulian claiming to use two swords, the climactic battle with Jade reveals her proficiency in eighteen different weapons. This not only establishes Yu Xiulian as a master beyond any specific sect but also emphasizes her embodiment of the chivalrous and righteous attributes characteristic of a "Xia."

Second, the attire selected for Yu Xiulian serves to further reinforce her identity. Unlike the clothing of characters such as Li Mubai or Jade, Yu Xiulian's garb is notably simpler and aligns more closely with traditional martial arts dress. This stylistic choice is congruent with her portrayal as a "Xia."

Furthermore, the auditory dimension of the film is strategically utilized to symbolize Yu Xiulian's character. During her fight with Jade, the background music features traditional Chinese drums in a rapid tempo, conjuring the heroic imagery that is emblematic of the "Xia" persona. This aural representation not only enhances the visual portrayal of Yu Xiulian but also underscores the nuanced cultural coding that defines her character within the narrative.

5   In Conclusion

In contending with phenomena such as "Orientalism" or "Self-Orientalization," the author posits that the notion and practice of harmony stand as an optimal resolution to manifold challenges. However, the precondition for this collaborative synergy rests on the pillars of mutual comprehension and esteem. Within this framework, the utilization of film as a medium for effective "cultural communication" and the construction of "Chinese cultural imagery" is an efficacious method to fulfill this requirement. Conversely, narratives tainted with deliberate or inadvertent "Orientalist" overtones do not augment this methodology positively. The imperative then falls upon filmmakers to weave together cultural symbols with philosophical insights to arrive at an equilibrium or "balanced" state.

In this context, the oeuvre of director Ang Lee serves as a paradigm of productive cultural dialogue, successfully conveying Chinese cultural imagery to global audiences. Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon communicators to apply an intellectual scrutiny to traditional culture or customs. This involves an evaluative process that examines their congruence with the ethical mores of contemporary civilization and their adherence or opposition to the essence of modern humanism.

Towards the objective of constructing "Chinese Cultural Imagery," the author advocates for an augmentation of scholarly endeavors in several key areas. These include an exploration of other cinematic works by director Ang Lee; a critical examination of

films from other Chinese filmmakers, such as Taiwanese directors Chung Meng-hong and Hou Hsiao-Hsien, along with Hong Kong directors Tsui Hark and Wong Kar-wai; and the application of quantitative research methodologies to devise a cohesive model of "Chinese Cultural Imagery." This multifaceted approach aims to enrich the academic discourse and foster a nuanced understanding of Chinese cultural representation within the international arena.

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